# COLOURING BOOK

GEORGE XIAOYUAN FU

# TRACKLIST

## DOUZE ÉTUDES POUR PIANO, L. 136, BOOK 1

**Claude Debussy**
George Xiaoyuan Fu, *piano*

1. **Étude 1, Pour les cinq doigts** 3:07
2. **Étude 2, Pour les tierces** 4:13
3. **Étude 3, Pour les quartes** 5:19
4. **Étude 4, Pour les sixtes** 4:19
5. **Étude 5, Pour les octaves** 2:52
6. **Étude 6, Pour les huit doigts** 1:41

## THREE ÉTUDES FOR PIANO AND FLOWER POTS

**Ninfea Cruttwell-Reade**
George Xiaoyuan Fu, *piano*
James Larter, *percussion*

7. **Reflective** 1:49
8. **Vivacious** 1:26
9. **Ethereal** 1:46

## THREE ÉTUDES

**Matthew Aucoin**
George Xiaoyuan Fu, *piano*

10. **rondo which devours itself** 2:37
11. **currents** 2:08
12. **a sounding** 4:22

## PASSACAGLIA ON A THEME BY RADIOHEAD

**George Xiaoyuan Fu**
George Xiaoyuan Fu, *piano*

13. **passacaglia on a theme by radiohead** 8:13

## DOUZE ÉTUDES POUR PIANO, L. 136, BOOK 2

**Claude Debussy**
George Xiaoyuan Fu, *piano*

14. **Étude 7, Pour les degrés chromatiques** 2:21
15. **Étude 8, Pour les agréments** 5:15
16. **Étude 9, Pour les notes répétées** 3:34
17. **Étude 10, Pour les sonorités opposées** 5:08
18. **Étude 11, Pour les arpèges composes** 4:55
19. **Étude 12, Pour les accords** 5:04

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COLOURING BOOK

*“You’ll agree that there's no need to make technique any gloomier in order to appear more serious, and that a bit of charm has never spoilt anything.”*

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**- Claude Debussy, 1915**

As the piano grew in popularity throughout Europe in the Classical era, *études* (studies) were written originally as teaching materials. This all changed with the arrival of Frédéric Chopin's two sets of twelve *études*, opp. 10 and 25, published in the 1830s. In Chopin's hands, the étude is transformed into a small, virtuosic work with much more substance and suitability for public performance. The remit of each study goes beyond mere mechanical mastery; for pupils the object was now to learn how a single technique might convey a more substantial musical message.

After mastering Chopin's studies, Franz Liszt then contributed to the genre with several more sets of his own. He revised his twelve *Transcendental Études* three times over the span of fifteen years (1837-52), with each revision taking on more extreme pianistic challenges.

Not to be outdone, Liszt and Chopin's pianist contemporaries – Friedrich Kalkbrenner, Adolf von Henselt, Ignaz Moscheles, Charles-Valentin Alkan and Sigismond Thalberg, to name a few – each composed and performed their own sets of show-stopping *études*, often appearing in sets of twelve after Chopin. This seems to suggest a sort of pianistic arms race taking place between the touring virtuosi of the era.

By the turn of the 20th century the arms race reached absurd heights and began to collapse onto itself; composers turned a self-referential eye onto the étude genre as a whole. Perhaps the best example of this is Leopold Godowsky's *53 Studies on Chopin's Études* (completed 1914), whereby Godowsky subjected Chopin's seminal work to all sorts of unthinkable permutations. One such study, entitled *Badinage*, stitches two Chopin studies in the same key on top of one another like an unholy Chopin-Frankenstein: one hand plays the 'Butterfly' study (op. 25 no. 9) while the other is assigned a skittering paraphrase of the 'Black Key' study (op. 10 no. 5). The resulting morass of notes exhibits a player-piano effect which leaves my ears numb. The *étude* seems to have circled back to the realm of Czerny's exercises, appealing more to the fingers than to the heart and brain.

In the same year that Godowsky's *Chopin Studies* were published in their final form, Claude Debussy began editing a new critical edition of Chopin's works for Durand, among them Chopin's opp. 10 and 25. It is around this time that he started working on sketches which were to become the *Douze Études* (1915).

Similar to Chopin, their titles seem to suggest the study of basic musical and technical elements: five-finger exercises, intervals, scales, etc. In fact, there is an inkling of the past inside each étude. The very opening of the set, *Pour les cinq doigts*, features a cheeky quotation from Carl Czerny's op. 777 "*Les Cinq Doigts*", a collection of pithy teaching pieces traditionally force-fed to beginner pianists. There are also similarities with Chopin's set throughout. Both composers write studies for thirds, sixths, chords and octaves; and in particular, *Pour les sixtes* bears a striking resemblance to Chopin's A-flat study from *Trois Nouvelles Études*. There are also textures reminiscent of Chopin's "Aeolian Harp" Étude (op. 25 No. 1) in *Pour les arpèges composés*.

All this is not to suggest that Debussy's *Études* are in any way limited or derivative; in fact, what is marvellous about them is how a starting point of strict limitations becomes the basis for endless creativity. In *Pour les cinq doigts* Czerny's flavourless five-finger pattern transforms into a witty jig at the drop of a hat, which Debussy develops further by stitching more five-finger patterns and scales in all sorts of rhapsodic textures and colours. In effect this étude is a loving satire on finger exercises, beginning with children's finger patterns and ending with a brilliant six-octave D-flat major scale.

The following study, *Pour les tierces*, is an exploration of legato, pedalling and voicing; in spite of the arduous task of playing even thirds throughout this study, the focus is laid upon the wonderful colours which result from blending them in different ways. Subsequently fourths and sixths are treated as subjects in tone poems, the former painting an evocation of the East

and gamelan sounds. Regarding the latter, Debussy writes to his publisher: “For a very long time, the continuous use of sixths gave me the feeling of pretentious *demoiselles* seated in a salon sulkily embroidering, envying the scandalous laughter of the mad ninths… yet I am writing this study… and it’s not ugly! *(Mea culpa…)*”

*Pour les octaves* is a fervid waltz marked *Joyeux et emporté* (joyful and carried away) and includes Lisztian octave runs that would give any Romantic virtuoso a run for their money. To close Book I, the irreverent *Pour les huit doigts* has the pianist tickle a ninety second run of nimble nonstop demisemiquavers up and down the keyboard without the use of thumbs – “the changing position of the hands makes the use of the thumbs inconvenient”, Debussy had thought. Then his pupil, Marguerite Long, astonished him by performing the study successfully with all ten digits. Faced with this feat Debussy could only applaud and henceforth authorised the use of thumbs.

If the subjects of Book I were more on the pianistic side (i.e. fingers and intervals), Book II focuses its gaze on compositional elements, and perhaps also delves more into the sonic exploration of the piano. *Pour les degrés chromatiques* challenges the pianist to find a feathery *leggerissimo* touch in the right hand, all the while balancing melodies and chorales in the left. *Pour les agréments*, my favourite of the entire set, weaves together delicate filigrees and ornaments into a ravishing musical texture: “a barcarolle on a sea that is a bit Italian”. There is a stunning balance between the small-scale intricacies of each ornament and the larger sweeping movements of waves in the barcarolle, all of which are delicately glued together by overhanging harmonies of the damper pedal.

The mercurial *Pour les notes répétées* scampers in afterwards with its repeated notes and quicksilver character changes, before *Pour les sonorités opposées* reveals something altogether different and astonishing. Few other works in Debussy’s oeuvre highlight his ear for colour as well as this study. From one piano emerges the illusion of a whole orchestra, playing from different perspectives and distances.

Much in the same vein, *Pour les arpèges composés* is a study not in the mechanics of arpeggios but rather their effects in harmony and texture. Debussy drapes complex arpeggios over a suave melody in the left hand, resulting in the most elegant and alluring music. But in the midst of all this, he suddenly gives way to a digression in the spirit of the vaudeville music hall – echoing his *Préludes* from a few years prior – before returning to the elegant music with which he began.

A similar contrast is struck in the final study, *Pour les accords*. Vigorous, rhythmic leaps between chords and octaves (which he referred to as “almost Swedish gymnastics”) are interrupted by a dreamy middle section. This interlude, with its perfumed chords and long periods of silence, drifts off laconically before finally returning to the music of gymnastic feats.

While publishing a set of twelve piano études was not novel in 1915, Debussy’s dozen presents a much needed step away from the technical arms race which had been precipitating amongst pianists for the better part of the past century. By now the notion of the Romantic virtuoso had amassed a lot of negative baggage, frequently criticised as an egotistical style of playing which overindulged in liberties. Debussy’s music can be seen as part of a movement which began to move away from that sense of subjectivity and egoism, gravitating towards leaner and more objective structures emphasising things like images, colours and sensations.

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When I arrived as a student at the Curtis Institute of Music, I embarked on a project to trace the *étude* genre throughout the history of the piano playing in an effort to improve my technical chops. Over the course of a year I learned and practised all sorts of études, ranging from Chopin’s 24 all the way up to some of John Cage’s quixotic games of chance, the *Etudes australes*.

It was fascinating to trace this line of evolution and I was eager to continue it by commissioning some new ones. I asked my friend from university, Matthew Aucoin, to write *Three Études* for me as a modern iteration of the genre, to be presented in a lecture-recital on *études* at Curtis. Between the menacing *rondo which devours itself*, the quirky *currents*, and the melancholic a *sounding*, Aucoin's work sees the *étude* as a genre following Debussy's framework rather than Liszt's: "These are studies not of particular technical challenges of piano playing, but rather in forms of musical motion and pianistic sonic possibilities."

The same can be said about Ninfea Cruttwell-Reade's *Three Études for Piano and Flower Pots* – I might also add that the use of gardening implements in a musical setting with piano has never before yielded such successful results. To perform this work, nine flower pots of varying sizes are first tuned to a scale by adding water (F - F# - A - A# - B - C - C# - C## (microtone) - F#) and then played with percussion mallets. The resulting blend of bright minimalistic patterns, traded between piano and flower pots, are as catchy as they are intense. Cruttwell-Reade writes: "As studies in sound, my three *études* respond to some of the expressive conventions of nineteenth-century piano repertoire while teasing out the musical capabilities of an everyday object."

The only work on this album which isn't expressly an *étude* is my own *passacaglia on a theme by radiohead*, though it borrows the explorational and virtuosic outlook of a piano study. *passacaglia* is intended both as a soloistic showpiece of sorts, but I wrote it also as an attempt to reconcile the varied influences in my artistic life.

The piece is based on the bassline of 'Airbag', the first track of Radiohead's *OK Computer*. For years I'd been tinkering with improvisations upon this bassline, but in 2020 I began to compose in earnest, teasing out a variety of permutations and variations over this material. I admit that it was fun to begin composing from a strict point of limitations: I found myself writing a tarantella-like dance, a rhapsodic buildup of trills and ornaments, a suave Sarabande, and finally a virtuosic cadenza which covers both extremes of the keyboard.

The decision then to present these works alongside Debussy's complete set felt completely natural – in fact, to place them between his two books of *études* provides interesting context to both the modern and the old. Around a century prior to today, Debussy, in following Chopin's framework of the *étude*, filled it with a bit of himself to create something new; Matthew, Ninfea and I are also all attempting the same thing in the present day. That seems to be the sign of a healthy tradition, and I hope it's one that will persist long after my time.

# GEORGE XIAOYUAN FU

American pianist George Xiaoyuan Fu has been praised as "*one of the most exciting pianists of our time… a deep thinker, thoroughly in command*" (The Arts Desk). Recently winning BBC Music Magazine's 2024 Newcomer Award, he is establishing an international reputation as a fearless and probing interpreter of a wide array of music, combining "*stunning virtuosity*" (Boston Music Intelligencer) and "*phenomenal technique with a profound sense of interpretative clarity*" (Apple Music).

George has appeared across the Americas and Europe, appearing at major venues such as the Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall, 92nd Street Y, Konzerthaus Berlin, Kennedy Center, St Martin In the Fields, the Southbank Centre, and Kings Place. His performances and interviews have been featured on broadcasts around the world, ranging from BBC Radio 3 and National Public Radio, to appearances on PBS/American Public Television and On Stage At Curtis in Philadelphia. Recent highlights include successful solo recital debuts at the Wigmore Hall as well as the Aldeburgh and Ryedale Festivals.

As concerto soloist he has performed with National Symphony Orchestra (USA), Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, North Carolina Symphony, Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra, and the Curtis Symphony Orchestra, amongst others. A frequent solo recitalist and chamber musician, George is a founding member of Trio Zimbalist alongside Josef Špaček (violin) and Timotheos Gavriilidis-Petrin (cello). He enjoys fruitful collaborations with a wide variety of artists such as Roberto Díaz (viola), Dmitri Sitkovetsky (violin), Tamsin Waley-Cohen (violin), Mika Sasaki (piano), Liv Redpath (soprano), and Lotte Betts-Dean (mezzo-soprano).

George's debut solo album, MIRRORS, was released on Platoon to international acclaim. The album draws on his visionary style of programming, using Maurice Ravel's Miroirs as a focal point and featuring an eclectic mix of composers: Sergei Rachmaninov, Germaine Tailleferre, Henri Dutilleux, Unsuk Chin, Timo Andres and Freya Waley-Cohen. The album earned a five-star review from BBC Music Magazine: "*Fu's approach is intelligent but fuelled by a deep emotion and understanding of the repertoire… his touch on the keys is barely apparent in the Ravel, with the music flowing gossamer-like.*" Gramophone also declared that "*Fu's precise fingerwork cannot be faulted, and his gift for programme-building deserves serious attention*"; while International Piano Magazine claimed that "*Fu's fluent and nuanced 'Barque' is one of the finest available*".

Born in Washington, D.C., George made his concerto debut with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center at the age of 17. After earning a bachelor's degree in economics from Harvard University, George studied with Jonathan Biss and Meng-Chieh Liu at the Curtis Institute of Music, and then with Christopher Elton and the Dame Myra Hess Chair of Piano Joanna MacGregor at the Royal Academy of Music. He has also worked intensively with Pierre-Laurent Aimard, specifically on the music of Messiaen and Debussy.

# CREDITS

Recorded at Britten Studios, Snape Maltings, Snape, Suffolk, UK
January 23 – 26, 2024

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